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ABSTRACT

Because the quoting of anonymous sources in journalism has received a great deal of attention recently, a study was conducted to focus attention on the broadcast media by examining the quoting of anonymous sources on network television newscasts. Four research questions were formulated: (1) What percentage of television news stories contain anonymous attribution? (2) How frequently are unnamed sources quoted? (3) What types of stories contain the most anonymous attribution? and (4) How are unnamed sources described? In the fall of 1982, two weeks of network television newscasts were selected randomly and videotaped. The resultant 27 newscasts and coded stories were analyzed according to a number of variables, including subject matter, type, and presence of anonymous contribution. About 55% of the 416 stories contained at least one quote that was attributed to an unnamed source. About 59% of the CBS stories, 57% of the NBC stories, and 47% of the ABC stories contained anonymous attribution. Subject matter of stories did not seem to affect the use of unnamed sources very much, and "neutral" anonymous sources were most often quoted. In light of these findings, network news organizations might consider restricting their granting of confidentiality to sources and letting viewers know more about how the information in news stories is confirmed. (DF)

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RADIO-TELEVISION JOURNALISM

The Unknown Expert: Anonymous Attribution on Network Television Newscasts

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CS 208 971

The quoting of anonymous sources in journalism has received a great deal of attention recently. Newspapers, magazines, trade journals and scholarly publications have all addressed the issue; however, most of the articles and studies have focused on anonymous attribution in the print media.[1] The purpose of this study was to focus some attention on the broadcast media by examining the quoting of anonymous sources on network television newscasts.

Some journalists look upon the practice of anonymous attribution as a "necessary evil."[2] Granting confidentiality to a news source can have advantages. It can help a journalist obtain information that might otherwise be unavailable.[3] It can help protect the life, liberty, job or property of a source.[4] It can give comfort to a reluctant source and his peers and thereby lead to a more complete and open dialogue between journalist and source.[5] It can make a story seem more "dramatic" or "investigative" by creating the impression that a reporter has secret sources that are not available to other journalists.[6] In short, anonymous attribution can help acquire information plus sell papers or magazines and increase ratings.

Granting confidentiality to a news source can have disadvantages, too. It can erode public confidence concerning the accuracy of news reports and the ethics of reporters.[7] It can allow one person to criticize another without having to be accountable for his/her accusations.[8] It is "quick fix" journalism--the easiest, fastest and laziest way to gather information.[9] It can be used by sources and reporters to pass along exaggerated or even fabricated information.[10] In short, anonymous attribution can damage journalistic credibility and distort the truth.

In general, research shows that anonymous attribution is a fairly common practice in journalism. One study found that about 33% of newspaper stories quoted unnamed sources.[11] Between 70% and 85% of Time and Newsweek stories have been found to contain "veiled" attribution.[12] Reporters in Washington, D.C. have said that approximately 28% of their interviews are "off-the-record."[13] Finally, in a content analysis of "administration-related" stories on network television newscasts, it was found that in about 50% of the sentences that had attribution, the source was unnamed.[14]

Each of the three commercial television networks has a formal policy regarding confidential sources. All of the policies recognize the occasional need for granting confidentiality, but caution against the overuse of the practice.[15] The policies include the following guidelines:

(1) Confidentiality should be granted only as a last resort after all other means to acquire the necessary information, including checking with other sources, have been exhausted.

(2) Information obtained from confidential sources must be verified.

(3) Confidential sources should be described as completely as possible without jeopardizing the source or the source-reporter relationship.

(4) When it is suspected that a confidential source may have a vested interest in the issue at hand or when the source makes serious accusations, information must be provided concerning the source's motivation.

(5) Reporters should be prepared to divulge the names of confidential sources to news executives.

Although most of the popular and trade press articles have generally condemned the practice of anonymous attribution and most journalistic codes of ethics caution against the abuse of the practice, research indicates that the public is not overly concerned or troubled by the quoting of unnamed sources. Readers seem to recognize the "cloaking" of sources and indicate that the practice is justified in some cases.[16] Readers give reasonably high credibility ratings to unnamed sources.[17] They perceive a controversial story to be more accurate and fair when no source or an unnamed source is quoted than when a named source or two conflicting named sources are quoted.[18]

The problem with anonymous attribution, as with so many other ethical concerns in journalism, is that when the practice is used sparingly and carefully with strict controls, it can be an extremely powerful and beneficial journalistic tool; however, when the practice is abused through indiscriminate use without proper controls, it can diminish the credibility of journalism and journalists.

Public confidence in the credibility of the news media is already low.[19] Some critics blame the declining public trust, in part, on the overuse of anonymous sources.[20] Others suggest that when journalists indiscriminately quote unnamed sources, they undermine the legitimate use of such sources as a journalistic tool.[21] In light of these concerns and since television news is often cited as the major source of information for most people, it seems important to determine just how frequently unnamed experts are quoted on network television newscasts.

Research Questions

(1) What percentage of network television news stories contain anonymous attribution?

(2) How frequently are unnamed sources quoted?

(3) What types of stories contain the most anonymous attribution?

(4) How are unnamed sources described?

Methods

In Fall, 1982, two weeks of network television newscasts were selected randomly and videotaped.[22] The authors content analyzed the resultant 27 newscasts and coded stories on the following variables:

(1) Subject matter

(2) Type

(3) Presence of anonymous attribution

(4) Frequency of anonymous attribution

(5) Form of anonymous attribution.

Story subject matter categories included government, economics/business, unexpected events, trials, foreign policy, international, sports, weather, features, politics/politicians and science.[23] Story type categories were reader, voice over, voice over/sound bite and reporter package.[24]

Anonymous attribution was defined as a direct or paraphrased quote attributed to an unnamed individual or individuals. The anonymous attribution form categories included associates, high status, neutral, subordinates, pro/con and experts.[25]

The reliability of the categorization of stories and the identification of anonymous attribution was checked by comparing the authors' coding of three randomly selected newscasts. For the resultant 47 stories, the percentage of agreement for the presence of anonymous attribution and for the type of story was 100%. For the form of anonymous attribution, agreement was 97% and for subject matter it was 94%.[26]

Findings

About 55% of the 416 stories contained at least one quote that was attributed to an unnamed source. About 59% of the CBS stories, 57% of the NBC stories and 47% of the ABC stories contained anonymous attribution. (X^2=5.186, df=2, $p < .07$)

In all, 484 anonymous attributions were included in the 227 stories. CBS broadcast 190 anonymous quotations, NBC 163 and ABC 131. (F=3.462, df=2, $p < .03$)

The percentage of stories containing anonymous attribution remained fairly constant across all subject matter categories. See Table 1. Unnamed experts were quoted most often in sports, feature and unexpected event stories, but the differences among the categories were not statistically significant.[27] (X^2=9.503, df=10, ns) In addition, the differences among the networks were not statistically significant. (X^2=13.300, df=20, ns)

There were some dramatic differences by story type, though. About 71% of the reporter packages contained anonymous attribution, compared to 39% of the voice over stories, 32% of the reader stories and 22% of the voice over/sound bites. (X^2=62.181, df=3, $p < .001$) The overall differences among the networks were not statistically significant (X^2=9.253, df=6, ns), but more CBS reporter packages contained anonymous attribution than did ABC or NBC packages. See Table 2.

The types of anonymous sources varied somewhat, too. "Neutral" sources were quoted most often, followed by "experts" and "high status" sources. CBS and NBC quoted "neutral" sources more often than did ABC. CBS and ABC quoted "pro/con" sources more often than did NBC. ABC and NBC quoted "experts" more often than did CBS. (X^2=18.845, df=10, $p < .05$) See Table 3.

The most common word used to describe an anonymous source was "official." The networks made 64 references to various "officials," followed by "sources"(19), "experts"(17) and "aides"(14).

Among the other anonymous source descriptors used were observers, researchers, investigators, analysts, forecasters, participants, insiders, members, authorities, cops, agents, critics, leaders, liberals, conservatives, republicans, democrats, scientists, specialists, staffers, survivors, spokesmen, diplomats, doctors, businessmen, friends, promoters, economists and retailers.

Finally, while not technically counted as anonymous quotes, 240 sound bites from people who were not verbally identified were used by the networks. The names of the people were superimposed on the screen, but, in light of research that has found that most people "watch" television news while doing something else, such sound bites may very well be perceived as anonymous.[28] CBS aired 128 "super-only" quotes, ABC aired 57 and NBC aired 55. (F=103.744, df=2, $p < .01$)

Discussion

Anonymous attribution was included in about 55% of the network television news stories analyzed in this study. In all, 484 quotes were attributed to unnamed sources. CBS used anonymous attribution more often than did NBC or ABC.

The subject matter of stories did not seem to affect the use of unnamed sources very much, but anonymous attribution did vary by the presentation style of stories. Reporter packages contained anonymous sources much more often than did voice overs, readers and voice over/sound bites.

"Neutral" anonymous sources were quoted most often, followed by "experts" and "high status" sources. "Official" was the most common word used to describe an unknown expert. "Source," "expert" and "aide" were also popular.

In the 27 newscasts analyzed, 240 interview subjects were not identified verbally by a reporter or anchorperson. CBS used such sound bites more often than did ABC or NBC.

Even though slightly more than half of the network television news stories analyzed in this study contained anonymous attribution, in most stories, whenever some type of attribution was given, the source was clearly identified. In the 227 stories that contained anonymous attribution, 109 contained just one reference to an unknown expert, 50 contained two, 35 had three, 15 had four, 6 had five, 7 had six, 2 had seven and 3 had eight.

The real issue, of course, is not whether a source is named or not named, but whether the information obtained from a source is accurate. Certainly, whenever a source is named, it makes it easier for viewers to judge credibility, but it doesn't guarantee that the information is true. By the same token, just because information has been obtained from a source who wants to remain anonymous, it does not mean such information is false.

Clearly, part of a journalist's function is to check the veracity of information--to verify facts, figures and allegations--and to obtain comments from people with opposing points of view or conflicting data. Confirmation and expansion of information should take place regardless of whether it has been obtained from an "on-the-record" or "off-the-record" source.

If network television journalists follow the formal guidelines of their news organizations, confirmation of statements made by confidential sources presumably takes place before such statements are broadcast. This means that instead of the source being accountable for the veracity of his/her statements, the network news organization becomes accountable.

If anonymous attribution is kept to a minimum and as long as viewers accept this transfer of accountability and know that reporters regularly confirm the accuracy of information obtained from confidential sources, anonymous attribution can continue to be used as a legitimate journalistic tool; however, such use is jeopardized when the practice is employed indiscriminately and/or viewers are not aware of rigorous confirmation policies.

It could be argued that when more than half of the network news stories contain anonymous attribution, the practice is being used too often. In addition, in the newscasts analyzed, there was no apparent effort by writers, reporters or anchormen to inform viewers that any information, especially that obtained from confidential sources, had been confirmed.

In light of these findings and in an effort to increase public confidence in the news media, network news organizations might consider restricting their granting of confidentiality to sources, strictly adhering to their formal news policies regarding anonymous attribution and letting viewers know more about how the information in news stories is confirmed.

sources
10-10

Notes

[1] Bill Green, "Janet's World," Washington Post, 104:A12-A15, (April 19, 1981); "The Pulitzer Lie," New York Times, 130:A24, (April 17, 1981); The National News Council, Who Said That?, New York: The National News Council, 1983, pp. 1-47; K. Tim Wulfemeyer, "Attributions Anonymous," RTNDA Communicator, 25:86, (October, 1982); Douglas A. Anderson, "How Newspaper Editors Reacted to Post's Pulitzer Prize Hoax," Journalism Quarterly, 59:363-366, (Autumn, 1982); K. Tim Wulfemeyer, "The Use of Anonymous Sources in Journalism," Newspaper Research Journal, 4:43-50, (Winter, 1983).

[2] Hugh M. Culbertson, "Leaks--A Dilemma for Editors As Well As Officials," Journalism Quarterly, 57:402-408,535, (Autumn, 1980).

[3] Bruce M. Swain, Reporters' Ethics, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1978, pp. 48-49; Delmer D. Dunn, Public Officials and the Press, Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969, pp. 44-45; Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials, Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973, pp. 42-46.

[4] Norman E. Isaacs, "Meeting the Barbed-Wire Frontier," Nieman Reports, 36:32-35, 54-56, (Summer, 1982).

[5] George S. Hage, Everette E. Dennis, Arnold H. Ismach and Stephen Hartgen, New Strategies for Public Affairs Reporting, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976, pp. 52-53; Paul N. Williams, Investigative Reporting and Editing, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978, pp. 63-64.

[6] Cynthia Bolbach, "The Janet Cooke Affair: Journalistic Ethics and Confidential Sources," The Christian Century, 98:826-829, (August 26/September 2, 1981); Hugh M. Culbertson, "Veiled Attribution--An Element of Style?," Journalism Quarterly, 55:456-465, (Autumn, 1978).

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[8] Gene Foreman, "Confidential Sources: Testing the Readers' Confidence," Nieman Reports, 38:20-23, (Summer, 1984); Mike Feinsilber, "The Anonymous Source Has Become an Institution," Presstime, 6:16, (July, 1984).

[9] ...man E. Issacs, interview with senior author, (March 2, 1982)

[10] H. Eugene Goodwin, Groping for Ethics in Journalism, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1983, pp. 118-132; John L. Hulteng, The Messenger's Motives, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976, pp. 85-105.

[11] Hugh M. Culbertson, "Veiled News Sources--Who and What Are They?" American Newspaper Publishers Association News Research Bulletin, 1975.

[12] Hugh M. Culbertson, "Veiled Attribution--An Element of Style?" Journalism Quarterly, 55:456-465, (Autumn, 1978); K. Tim Wulfemeyer, "Anonymous Attribution in Time and Newsweek: Frequency and Form," paper presented at Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convention, Oregon State University, August, 1983.

[13] Stephen Hess, The Washington Reporters, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1981, pp. 19-20.

[14] Michael W. Singletary, Lucia Andrews and Lionel Grady, "TV Network News 12 Years After Agnew's Assault on the Media," Sixth Annual Research Symposium: A Proceedings, College of Communications, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, (June, 1983), pp. 97-108.

[15] ABC News policy guidelines obtained from George Watson, vice president, ABC News. CBS News policy guidelines obtained from Emerson Stone, vice president, CBS News. NBC News policy guidelines obtained from KHON-TV, Honolulu, Hawaii.

[16] Hugh M. Culbertson and Nancy Somerick, "Variables Affect How Persons View Unnamed Sources," Journalism Quarterly, 54:58-69, (Spring, 1977); Rebecca Pratt and Robert George, "A Searching of Conscience," Newsweek, 92:50-51, (May 4, 1981).

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[18] Fred Fedler and Tim Counts, "Variations in Attribution Affect Readers' Evaluations of Stories," Newspaper Research Journal, 2:25-34, (April, 1981).

[19] William A. Henry, Richard Bruns and Christoper Ogden, "Journalism Under Fire," Time, 122:76-93, (December 12, 1983).

[20] After 'Jimmy's World': Tightening Up In Editing, New York: The National News Council, 1981, pp. 59, 121-180.

[21] Cynthia Bolbach, "The Janet Cooke Affair: Journalistic Ethics and Confidential Sources," The Christian Century, 98:826-829, (August 26/September 2, 1981); "The Pulitzer Fake--The Echoes Linger," U.S. News & World Report, 90:11, (April 27, 1981).

[22] Monday-Friday, November 15-November 19 and November 29-December 3, were videotaped. A malfunction on November 16 reduced the sample by three newscasts.

[23] The categories were developed after several months of informal viewing of network newscasts and a pre-study sampling of two newscasts from each network.

[24] A "reader" was defined as a story read by an anchorman. It had no videotape. A "voice over" was defined as a story read by an anchorman, but containing videotape. A "voice over/sound bite" was defined as a story read by an anchorman, but containing videotape and a statement by a source. A "reporter package" was defined as a story primarily presented by someone other than an anchorman.

[25] "Associates" included colleague, friend, associate, acquaintance, loyalist and insider. "High Status" included official, leader, authority, policymaker and planner. "Neutral" included observer, spectator, witness and "average men and women" who served as news sources. "Subordinate" included aide, spokesman, staffer, assistant, adviser and deputy. "Pro/Con" included supporter, defender, critic, enemy, backer, admirer, booster and ally. "Expert" included analyst, scholar, researcher, expert and investigator. Categories developed by Hugh M. Culbertson. See Note 12.

[26] William A. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," Public Opinion Quarterly, 19:321-325, (Fall, 1955).

[27] The time of year could be a factor in at least two of the categories. In "sports," the National Football League players strike was going on and in "features" there were numerous stories about the holidays. Many unidentified "average citizens" were quoted in both "sports" and "feature" stories.

[28] Mark. R. Levy, "The Audience Experience With Television News, " Journalism Monographs, 55:1-29, (April, 1978).

sources
15-15

TABLE 1

Stories Containing Anonymous Attribution in Percent by Network

Story Category	Total (N=416)	ABC (144)	CBS (137)	NBC (135)
Government	52	50	62	46
Business/Economy	52	55	60	38
Unexpected Events	64	45	67	87
Trials	42	30	27	67
Foreign Policy	54	50	63	46
International	56	45	57	73
Sports	65	57	75	60
Weather	44	33	80	20
Feature/Entertainment	64	75	50	75
Politics/Politicians	59	50	80	50
Science/Medicine	54	38	58	67

sources
16-16

TABLE 2

Types of Stories Containing Anonymous Attribution in Percent by Network

Story Type	Total (N=416)	ABC (144)	CBS (137)	NBC (135)
Reader	32	36	28	32
Voice Over	39	31	44	56
Voice Over/Sound Bite	22	50	0	0
Reporter Package	71	58	85	71*

* $X^2=24.549$, df=2, $p < .01$)

sources
17-17

TABLE 3

Types of Anonymous Sources Quoted in Percent by Network

Type of Source	Total (N=450)	ABC (120)	CBS (170)	NBC (160)
Associate	2	2	4	1
High Status	25	22	24	29
Neutral	31	36	23	31
Subordinate	5	5	3	6
Pro/Con	11	13	13	6
Expert	26	22	33	27

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